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For many journalists Ebola's invisible threat scarier than war

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You can't see shells falling, guns pointed or identify the bad guys: for many journalists the invisible threat of Ebola is more unnerving than covering a war.

Along with health workers and aid workers, journalists have to get right up close to the epidemic to do their job, donning gloves, masks and rubber boots and washing hands with chlorine countless times a day.

"We have less difficulty finding journalists to go to Iraq or Central African Republic" than Ebola-hit countries, said Claire Hedon of Radio France Internationale (RFI) who just returned from Guinea.

Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, have borne the brunt of the epidemic which has killed over 4,500 people out of a total of 9,216 cases registered in seven countries, according to the World Health Organization.

At least five local journalists have succumbed to Ebola, according to media unions. Three were in Liberia and two in Sierra Leone, including the radio journalist Victor Kassim who died along with his wife, two children and mother.

Three media workers were also among an eight-member Ebola education team murdered last month by panicked villagers in a remote area near the epicentre of the outbreak in Guinea.

So far only one of the dozens of Western journalists covering the epidemic in west Africa has caught Ebola—Ashoka Mukpo, an American freelancer for NBC who is recovering well.

But for those on the ground stalked by an unseen enemy, every interview poses a risk.

"Some journalists used to covering war zones have not volunteered for family reasons," explains Sofia Bouderbala, deputy editor-in-chief for Agence France Presse's Europe and Africa region.

"It is an invisible threat. In war zones you can see the shells falling."

Associated Press international editor-in-chief John Daniszewski said that the subject was "very stressful" to cover, as you can't see the enemy.

Interviewing at a distance

On top of all the safety precautions, one of the main rules on the ground for reporters is to keep your distance.

"The basic rule is don't touch anything or anyone. And two weeks without touching anyone is weird," said AFP's Marc Bastian who recently returned from Monrovia.

"We left with litres of disinfectant. We sprayed our shoes with bleach, we washed our hands 40, 50 times a day," he said.

"Photographers use telephoto lenses to photograph the sick and I once shouted out an interview with someone eight metres away."

For radio reporters who need sound, the process is equally tricky.

Yves Rocle, deputy director for the Africa region with RFI explains that their journalists use a boom to get sound. "We avoid contact," he said.

"I have interviewed the sick from two metres away, where it is considered you won't be hit by spittle," said the Hedon, who admits that sometimes one's attention can slip and possibly fatal errors be made.

"To be honest, you let your guard down. Yes in the end I shook a few hands."

Shunned upon return

The assignment doesn't end at the airport.

For many coming home to face fearful colleagues and family members, while still anxiously counting down the incubation period themselves, it can be a scary and lonely time.

"When coming back you take your own temperature for 21 days, the incubation period, and you worry at the slightest alert," said Guillaume Lhotellier, who went to Guinea for the Elephant production company.

"And your social life isn't great, there are people who refuse to shake your hand or see you, even though you are not contagious if you don't have a fever."

Even if a person is infected, only direct contact with their bodily fluids—mucus, semen, saliva, vomit, stool or blood—after they begin to show symptoms carries any risk of contagion.

But fear over the disease has led to extreme precautions.

Faced with a panicked wife, Johannes Dieterich, the South Africa

correspondent for Swiss daily Tages-Anzeiger, said that he slept in the guest room on his return and decided not to touch anyone for three weeks until the incubation period was over.

The BBC's Fiona Bruce, quoted by The Telegraph, said make-up artists were scared of taking care of guests coming from Ebola-hit countries.

Media organisations are divided over the idea of a systematic quarantine during the incubation period for reporters returning from the field.

The BBC and AFP allow journalists to come straight back to work.

"Our journalists respect our very strict guidelines on location. They are not a risk to their colleagues because they have no symptoms of the disease. We don't want to give in to hysteria," said Michele Leridon, AFP's news director.

However AP asks its journalists to stay at home for three weeks to "avoid any risk", said Daniszewski.

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